Approaches to Hindi Intellectual History

GREGORY GOULDING

The Hindi Canon: Intellectuals, Processes, Criticism stands out as one of the very few translations in English of contemporary criticism in Hindi, and perhaps the first published monograph in translation.¹

In contrast with other modern South Asian literature, most relevantly Urdu and Bangla, Hindi literary history as such is rarely if ever the subject of translation, and although there is an important and growing body of work dealing with this topic in English, the two critical communities rarely communicate with each other.²

This book must therefore be seen as a welcome and promising development, comparable to the recent translations into Hindi of Dalmia (1999) (translated by Sanjiv Kumar in 2016 as Hindī Paramparā-kā Rāṣṭhrīyakārān) and Orsini (2002) (translated by Neelabh as Hindī kā Lokvīrīt in 2011), both considered foundational to the field in English.

Although The Hindi Canon cannot be said to have the same prominence of these texts, but for one thing, it is a more recent work, having been originally published in Hindi in 2015. Moreover, its careful translation by Shad Naved, generous use of quotations from well-known critics in Hindi and authoritative citational practice have created a similar opportunity for scholars in English to engage with a body of writing in Hindi that is of crucial importance, not only for understanding North Indian literary history, but also for a comparative understanding of the literary historiography of South Asia as a whole.

Lacking a context in which to analyse the debates and methodologies that shape this work, any review runs the risk of flattening the rich textual universe in which this book participates. It should very much be read in the light of the methods developed by Namvar Singh, Ram Vilas Sharma, and Manager Pandey—all of whom it cites extensively—as well as more recent critical voices, such as those of Sanjeev Kumar, Apoorvanand, and Abhay Kumar Dubey. Given that this review is written in English, there is a danger of evaluating this book in terms of English-language scholarship, with which Mrityunjay Tripathi also engages, but which is nonetheless distinct in its aims, methods, and interest from the Hindi literary history with which this book is concerned. But it is also an expansive text, representative of its milieu but innovative in its approach, and so it offers a chance to understand the methodology of contemporary Hindi literary history in ways otherwise unavailable.

**Hindi Literary Canons**

Tripathi presents his work as an examination of canon formation (the original title in Hindi is Hindī Alocanā Mein Canon-nirmāṇ kī Prakriya, or “The processes of canon formation in Hindi criticism”) in the 19th and 20th centuries. As such, it forms an intellectual history of criticism in English and Hindi from the Fort Williams College period to the present day. Although Tripathi takes up a large range of critics over five chapters, the narrative of the text primarily concerns the work of Ramchandra Shukla, author of the foundational 1928 Hindī Sāhitya kā Itihās, and the Marxist critics, namely Sharma, Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh, and Singh, who wrote most of their work following independence.

Material dealing with questions of literary history preceding and following these two moments is relatively scanty; indeed, one may wish for a work that focused solely on the interpretation of Shukla’s work by post-independence Hindi critics. These debates take up the central three chapters. The first chapter, dealing with early formations of literary canons in the 19th century, can more accurately be seen as a prelude, and the final chapter, which deals with the critique of the Hindi canon by feminist and Dalit writers, functions as a coda to the discussion of the previous three chapters.

In his introduction, Tripathi takes his definition of a canon and the impetus of the book from a statement by Singh asserting that “Hindi criticism is not a part of Hindi literature; rather, the history of Hindi literature is a part of Hindi criticism” (p.1). Following this principle—that “Hindi literature” both as an idea and as a body of work was formed by a critical and canonising process—Tripathi uses the concept of canon to shift the focus of literary history away from individual works, and towards debates over the formation of literary history in Hindi. Tripathi insists on the English term canon, against Hindi words such as pratimaan, because whereas pratimaan, with its root word of maan, or “measure,” implies some kind of standard or essence of literature, canon focuses on the social process through which pieces of literature were elevated into literary history. Tripathi furthermore argues, citing the poet and critic Neelabh, that Hindi is uniquely bound to its literary history and the conditions under which that history was formed and shaped. The reasons for this will be well known to readers familiar with the history of the Hindi–Urdu debates; The Hindi Canon, however, focuses primarily on the literary history of the 20th century, which took shape in the wake of these developments.

**Impact of Ramchandra Shukla**

The central figure of this book is, inevitably, Shukla, whose work is discussed at length in the second chapter. Shukla built on the work of the Mishra brothers to formulate the modern canon of Hindi literature in the context of anti-imperial nationalism. In the process, he established a chronology of Hindi literature that privileged sagun (one with qualities) bhakti poets such as Surdas and Tulsidas as Hindu responses to Mughal
domination, and presented Kabir as a folk figure rather than a literary figure. The periodisation of Hindi literature, the elevation of bhakti religious literature over courtly riti poetry, and the contradictions of this canon, in particular the controversy over the position of Kabir within Hindi literature, would prompt the revision of his work by Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, even as Shukla’s reinterpretation of rasa was extended by Nand Dulare Bajpai. By looking at the Mishra brothers, Shukla, Bajpai, and Dwivedi together, Tripathi presents a narrative of Hindi literary history, prior to independence.

It is dominated by questions over canon and tension over caste, class, and communalism that are largely defined by the colonial and nationalist period. Although some of this material will be familiar through Milind Wakankar’s Subalternity and Religion (2010) and John Stratton Hawley’s A Storm of Songs (2015), this chapter does much to contextualise these figures in a narrative of Hindi literary history.

Chapter 3, “The Canon According to Marxist Criticism,” is probably the most useful chapter of this work; in contrast to the work of Shukla and other critics of the colonial and nationalist periods, the crucial works of post-independence critics are relatively unknown in English-language scholarship. Tripathi details the work of Sharma, Mukti Bodbhod, Singh, and Pandey, and in the process, expands the scope of his idea of the Hindi canon. Although the revision of the literary canon, especially through Mukti Bodbhod’s monumental essay “Madhyayug Bhakti Andolan kā ek Pahlī” (An Aspect of the Medieval Bhakti Movement), is discussed at length, a primary focus of this chapter is the debates over new poetry, or naï kavitā, that dominate Marxist criticism.

In this sense, the focus of Tripathi’s work seems to expand beyond the idea of the literary canon as it is established in the opening chapter, in favour of more general interest in literary historiography in the 20th century. Critics of this time, even as they continued to debate premodern literary history, also began to include in their literary history the recent chāyāvād (literally, “shadow-ism,” but loosely translatable as romantic) poets, and they also began to develop theories of literary realism. Tripathi details the important works of this period, including Mukti Bodbhod’s Kāmāyani: Ek Punarvichār (Kāmāyani: A Reassessment) and Singh’s Kavitā ke Naye Pratimaan (New Criteria of Poetry). Through showing how debates over the literary canon of premodern Hindi intersect with and shape debates over aesthetics in modern literature, Tripathi illuminates a crucial period in Hindi literary historiography.

The final two chapters, “The Counterpositions to Marxist Criticism” and “Questions of Identity and Decanonisation,” are comparatively less developed, but they demonstrate the ways in which Hindi literary history tends to focus on the shift from Shukla to Marxist criticism, and how other issues, such as the critiques of the Hindi literary canon put forth by Dalit literary criticism, tend to be subsumed under this rubric. Although there is a great deal of material here, it is clear that Tripathi presents strands of criticism as wrapped up in the debates over realism, formalism, and aesthetic autonomy, which ultimately can be traced to the Marxist, post-independence critics discussed in earlier chapters. These final chapters vividly demonstrate that the questions raised by Shukla over the proper canon of Hindi literature, and especially the position of Kabir, remain some of the most vibrant and pressing questions of Hindi literary historiography today.

**Historiography of Hindi Criticism**

The translation is excellent, maintaining both readability and technical consistency in translating critical terms from Hindi. Furthermore, this book includes a bibliography and index that will prove quite useful, since this text bristles with extensive quotations. Indeed, for those without access to literary criticism in Hindi, this text will prove a valuable introduction to its intellectual history and could enable the kinds of comparative scholarship of modern literature that is urgently needed today. A translator’s introduction of some sort would have been useful in contextualising the debates alluded to in this book, which are fundamental to contemporary Hindi criticism but not necessarily understood outside of that discourse. Notably, the book contains little to no discussion of the biographies of the critics, or of the sociological conditions for literary production or other relevant aspects of intellectual history. Rather, Tripathi focuses exclusively on published excerpts from major works of criticism. While this may arguably be appropriate to Hindi literary criticism, it will leave a reader without access to the context around that discourse, at times overwhelmed.

Ultimately, the publication of this book serves to highlight the urgent need for further translation of Hindi criticism. The most important works discussed here, such as Shukla’s Hindi Sāhiya ka Itiḥās and Singh’s Kavitā ke Naye Pratimaan, are untranslated, to say nothing of important essays by Mukti Bodbhod—who is known, if at all outside Hindi, as a poet. One hopes that the work done here by Shad Naved will inspire further careful translations of this kind, in the process allowing for greater understanding of different models of literary history.

**NOTES**

1 Exceptions include the important anthology by Nijhawan (2010) and the pieces included in the short-lived journal Hindi: Language, Discourse, Writing.

2 See, for instance, Dubey (2015: 89–149), which discusses English-language criticism of Hindi literature extensively and critically.

**REFERENCES**


